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Naval Tactics and the Introduction of the Aircraft Carrier

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For many, the story of World War 2 is a war that centers on Europe and the destruction of the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler. The European Theater included iconic moments and battles such as D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge. It also set the stage for another conflict only a few years after the V-E Day as the United States and West ostracized the Soviet Union and the East; this was evident in the German city of Berlin where the city split into halves based on who controlled the part of the city. Europe is also an international center of politics and commerce and as a player on the current world stage, people tend to place more emphasis on the European Theater when thinking of the Second World War, primarily because of how today dictates historical memory.

While the fighting in Europe is significant, for good reason, the war in the Pacific included some of the most brutal ground fighting, large changes in naval warfare and the dropping of the only two atomic bombs used in warfare in human history. The success of the United States in the Pacific hinged primarily on new naval tactics, especially because of the advent of the aircraft carrier and the usage of planes in naval battle. If it were not for the adaptation of naval warfare and the success of new naval tactics, specifically the utilization of the aircraft carrier, the Pacific could have very easily become the possession of the Japanese.

When the Japanese attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, much of the Pacific Fleet was decimated. The day of the attacks the Japanese Ambassador gave to the United States Secretary of State a message declaring that all negotiations between the two nations were done. The message continued on to say that Japan planned to continue to establish their new order East, including parts of the Pacific Ocean where, that day, they had already staged massive

operations, attacking Americans not only in Hawaii, but also the Philippines.¹ At this point, it became evident that the Pacific was going to need to be secured and it would take a reworking of old naval tactics in order to be successful in the war against the Empire of Japan.

One of the major tactical changes of the United States Navy was the switch to the carrier-based fleet. The transition from a battleship-based fleet to a carrier-based fleet was not something that occurred overnight. In fact, when the complete fleet became available for use in 1943, there was already the beginning of an integration of the old and new, “drawing on existing doctrine where that made sense and creating new doctrine where that was called for.”² This change in doctrine by the US Navy in the Second World War has set the standard for future warfare, and is similar to what is seen today.

Even in its infancy, it was obvious that the biggest advantage a carrier-based fleet provided is the ability to not only control expanses of ocean, but also areas of airspace and potentially enemy territory by forming air superiority with these floating cities. Prewar, as these ships were just being recognized as valuable for the fleet, the doctrine focused on groups with only one carrier. However, in 1942, it became evident that when carrier forces worked “in concert,” the results were even greater.³ This would lead to complicated and coordinated attacks on the Japanese that would cause massive damage to ships, bases and even cities on the home island as the war went on. However, it would take a period of time of working out problems for these attacks to become as successful as they were.

¹ Empire of Japan, "Japanese Note to the United States United States December 7, 1941." *Avalon Project*, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/p3.asp>. (accessed November 17, 2014).

² Hone, Thomas C., "Replacing Battleships with Aircraft Carriers in WWII." *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 1 (2013): 56.

³ Tillman, Barrett. "Fighting the Carrier War." *Naval History*, October 2010: 28.

Carriers had their place in the war in Europe, but were not focused on as the center of many fleets. In fact, they usually were part of submarine hunting operations and escort missions. While incredibly slow, they provided enough support and protection to convoys to prevent many attacks by German U-boats. The ships also participated in the Mediterranean as supports for landings in Morocco and North Africa. They also helped with bombing runs over France, with Hellcats making strafing runs over the Riviera.⁴ While serving in a much glamorous role, and not taking a headline in the European theater, the carriers were incredibly important, but served in a much different role.

Before 1943, the carriers were expected to primarily help with three different types of missions: raids, ambushes, and covering invasion forces. These tasks were preformed by these ships well and were successful in many instances. However, in places like Guadalcanal, success came at high prices and provided opportunities for the leadership to learn and adjust the strategy of using carriers. One major problem was that until 1943, there was a lack of a cohesive and comprehensive doctrine for aircraft carriers. This proved to be problematic in places early in the war when leadership changed on a relatively regular basis and information and tactics were exchanged very rarely. This lack of exchange of information set the leadership up for problems, as when new people came on, they had to relearn lessons in battle that others had already figured out and solved. This would also prove to be an issue when carriers grouped together to form large task forces. The ability to work in large groups without interfering with other ships would be critical in the midst of battle when things can potentially become hazy.⁵ On top of that, the whole task force in general needed new doctrinal changes. While the cruxes of the task forces

⁴ Barrett Tillman, "The Carrier Comes of Age," *Naval History*, 2010: 27.

⁵ Hone, "Replacing Battleships," 61.

were the carriers many other types of ships accompanied them in their groupings. Destroyers, battleships, cruisers, and submarines all helped make up one task force. Experiments took place at Pearl Harbor with combinations of carriers and other ships and eventually the commanders put together what was one of the most important doctrines in the Pacific war, if not the entire war itself, PAC-10. This new doctrine covered everything. From single carrier task forces to multicarrier forces to amphibious assault forces, the doctrine outlined protocol all while integrating in the rest of the ships in the fleet.

Another part of the new doctrine that was helped by the carrier based fleet is that it could take the battle to the ground and help with raids and provide support. What became evident was that in order to have success, was that there was a necessity to be able to split into smaller groups and be able to get to the fight. This was seen by using small fleets centered with a carrier and surrounded by fast battleships to help provide coverage. This new tactic allowed multiple places to be targeted at once.

A key to making sure carrier fleets succeeded was the use of intelligence gathering planes to find enemy ships. Because of the mobility of these bases, and the reach of the planes housed in them, being the first one to strike could make the difference in sinking the other ships or being sunk. This was shown to be the case at the Battle of Midway. This battle was one of the first naval battles where the ships from with side never saw each other. The Japanese had seen some success against the United States Navy at this point and were trying to potentially put them away for good. However, that did not end up being the case. The Japanese navy was looking to incite conflict and because of that, had to make a conflict for the United States seem like something that potentially winnable without it actually being so. The U.S., however, had obtained

information of all this and were prepared for this battle. The ability to break codes and then act on information allowed the United States to strike first which, in the end resulted in a victory.⁶

The naval battle at Guadalcanal provided the United States Navy another opportunity to show the usefulness of their new super-weapon. By the time the battle between navies occurred, the land campaign by Allied forces is well underway and Japan is trying to dislodge the Allies off the island and retake Henderson Field. Most of these battles occurred at night, which provided the Japanese, who had a system for night fighting, a large advantage and thus caused many casualties for the Americans. However, superior American intelligence, along with the large amount of aircraft that the U.S. possessed because of the carriers present and the airfield on the island, helped wear down the Japanese and eventually solidify the United States as the major power over the island. This led to being able to implement the island hopping strategy from the base, which helped set up many more attacks in the Pacific. Once again, carriers became a game-changer in the midst of the battle and worked well in unison with other military facets.⁷

As the war continued it was crucial to continue to update the carrier to be sure it performed at its max ability. The Essex-class was the advancement in carrier technology. These ships were not only massive; being able to hold more planes, but were also fast. The planes on these ships included torpedo-bombers, Hellcat fighters, and a new generation of tailhook aircraft, which allowed for amphibious landings and assaults that would have not been possible to land-based planes because of distances between targets.⁸ These planes were crucial because it allowed

⁶ Levy, James P. "WAS THERE SOMETHING UNIQUE TO THE JAPANESE THAT LOST THEM THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY?" *Naval War College Review* 67, no. 1 (2014): 121.

⁷ Mahnken, Thomas. "Asymmetric Warfare at Sea." *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 1 (2011): 106.

⁸ Tillman, "The Carrier Comes of Age," 23.

the island-hopping strategy to be successful when it otherwise would have not been. For assaults, the navy relied much more on their light-class carriers. These were converted Essex carriers with lighter hulls. While they could perform most of the same tasks, the amount of planes on one of these ships was only about one-third of what was on a normal sized ship. What they lacked in amount of planes and other weapons, it made up for in speed and maneuverability. These new, lighter hull carriers worked fantastically with the larger, Essex-class and lead many offensives across the Pacific, including the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. During the entire span of the war, only one light carrier was sunk.⁹

Operation GALVANIC showed how the combined use of carrier working along with smaller ships could control amphibious assaults. This was implemented in the Gilbert Islands on the atolls of Tarawa, Mankin, and Abemama. Using the reconnaissance that was afforded to the navy by the planes from the carriers, they set their sights on these small islands. The command also split the battleships up between carrier fleets to stay prepared for any counter attacks and also potentially provide battle-line support for the islands if needed. This would help augment the amphibious assault that occurred as well as the air cover that came with it. The tempo of attacks that led to the assaults on the Gilberts kept the Japanese on their toes and guessing where the next attack would be. Because of this, when it was time for the raid, there was not much of preparation for an American attack on the atolls. While the fighting was intense for these small specks of land in the ocean, the American Navy helped make these battles shorter.¹⁰ According to Norman Hatch, a cinematographer who served with Marines on the island the battle was short and intense. "Tarawa lasted 76 hours, over 6,000 people were killed – about 5,000 of those were

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hone, Trent. "US Navy Surface Battle Doctrine and Victory in the Pacific." *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 1 (2009): 76.

Japanese – and over 1,000 wounded, all on an island about one third the size of Central Park in New York. There was a lot of lead flying around in those 76 hours.”¹¹ Hatch, who served throughout World War Two in the Pacific, covered many different battles including Tarawa and Iwo Jima saw first-hand just how useful the reinforcements were provided by the carrier fleets. Armed with only a camera, and in the middle of the raging battle, Norman recorded the carnage of the fight, but also the success of the Second Marines. In an interview with Marsha Orgeron, a professor at North Carolina State University, Hatch talks about his memories in the amphibious tractors as they descended onto the island. ¹²

Amphibious assaults played a large part in the new strategy of the Second World War. Because of the need quickly attack and in multiple areas, the ability to get from water to ground and back out to sea was vital. One instance of this being used and working well is during the Battle of Saipan in June and July of 1944. This battle, which ended in a victory for the Americans, relied heavily, especially in the beginning, on amphibious tractors and tanks to not only bring the battle from the water to land, but also with getting much needed supplies to the troops on the island. ¹³

For the United States, these tactics were crucial, but communication between the many commanders proved to be one of the hinges on which battles were won or lost as well. In the Pacific, command fell to two people, General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz.

¹¹ Hatch, Norman, interview by Marsha Orgeron. *Filming The Marines In The Pacific: An Interview With World War II Cinematographer Norman Hatch*. (2008): 164.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gugeler, Russell A. "ARMY AMPHIBIAN TRACTOR AND TANK BATTALIONS IN THE BATTLE OF SAIPAN 15 JUNE-9 JULY 1944." *Army History*. <http://www.history.army.mil/documents/WWII/amsai/amsai.htm> (accessed November 12, 2014).

Both men were incredibly powerful and had many supporters in D.C. Because of this, there was never a clear unity of the command in the Pacific and was the root of many grievances from both sides.¹⁴ While this is cited as one major difference between the different theaters of war, Europe had the same problem. In fact, there were more zones in the European theater where there was disconnect in the unity of command than there were in the Pacific. The ability to work around breakdowns in communication and strategy between the two leaders was critical. If that does not happen, the Pacific would surely have fallen to the Japanese.

Nimitz, who would later have a class of carriers named after him, was able to work around these problems with not only multiple commanders, but the multitude of leaders in his own group. Before PAC-10 was put into hands of the sailors, this lack of communication and structure was detrimental to the war effort and potentially disastrous. Once a uniform set of instructions was put into the hands of Nimitz's men, however, there was a dramatic shift in the effectiveness of how the carrier fleets were operated.¹⁵

It was not only the United States who had plans on switching to a carrier-based navy. Japan, whose navy was flexing its muscle as it made grabs for many key islands in the Pacific, utilized its integration of battleship fleets and carriers to control vast areas of the Ocean. Carriers also played a pivotal role in the attacks on Pearl Harbor as they allowed Japanese fighters to get in range to make the runs. This attack was the first time in history where six carriers were used

¹⁴ Meilinger, Phillip S. "Unity of Command in the Pacific During World War II." *Joint Force Quarterly*, 2010: 152.

¹⁵ Hone, "Replacing Battleships," 63.

as part as one strike force. According to John Lundstrom, this move was unprecedented and was “a kind of 1941 atomic bomb.”¹⁶

Japan also was on the cutting-edge of technology gaining equipment such as radar at the same time, if not earlier as the United States. One thing that separated the armies was the gap in intelligence gathering. The United States was able to be much more efficient with the gathering of intelligence on the whereabouts of carriers and task forces that belonged to the Japanese. While U.S. committed many gaffes when it came to gathering information, the fact remains that the United States was able to beat Japan to the punch in many situations or surprise the Japanese Navy with their attacks that resulted in battles won that could have gone either way. The persistence of the United States forced Japan to shift their thinking in battle and moved to kamikaze-based attacks which forced the United States to adapt their carrier strategy.

The fact that the United States’ carriers were and still are adaptable to the current situation is another reason why the appeal was so large. This was especially apparent as the battle developed in the Pacific. The makeup of wings in U.S. aircraft changed over the years in response to the changes in the way the Japanese fought. As Kamikaze fighters became commonplace, the goal was to stuff as many planes onto the ships as possible. The plane changes required little to no structural reconfiguration to the hangars on the ships and allowed the Navy to respond quickly to this deadly form of attacks.¹⁷

While on the ground in the Pacific, fighting techniques were adapted to the conditions of battle, the changes were not nearly as great in the sense of amount of change as the naval warfare

¹⁶ Tillman, “The Carrier Comes of Age,” 22.

¹⁷ Friedman, Norman. “The Value of Modularity.” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 140, no. 4 (April 2014): 89.

tactics were. These changes can all be traced back to have roots in the introduction of carriers as the center of fleets in the Pacific. The change from battleships as the center of forces as they still were in the Atlantic, to carriers drastically changed the outcome of what the war could have been against the Japanese and set a precedent for much of the naval warfare that is seen currently. The innovations made during the war to upgrade ships based on fighting situations also played a large part in the success that was had. The ability to adjust ships and the types of planes that were carried with little to no structural changes allowed for a fast turnaround when it came to implementing new policies and potentially saved many vessels, especially when the Japanese began to send kamikaze fighters. At the end of the day, change was going to be necessary in order to win war against the Japanese. That change was the implementation of many new naval tactics; the majority were hinged on these new aircraft carriers. If it were not for the new tactics put into the place by the navy, particularly those, which involved aircraft carriers, the fight in the Pacific could have very easily gone the other way and in favor of Japan.

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